

Comment

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My comments on John Dearlove's interesting article are addressed to the three elements of the critical assessment that he offer in Section III.

First, I think that to focus on the difficulties and inadequacies of prediction and testing in the social sciences is to miss the principal reason for the success of the rational-individual paradigm. The Chicago approach to economics, and now to the economics of politics, has gained strong support not because it has a demonstrably superior track record in prediction in a narrow sense, but because it provides its followers and students with a parsimonious and powerful set of interpretive tools. Those who do not like its assumptions and conclusions face the challenge of providing as powerful and as comprehensive an alternative, and that is a formidable challenge. The public choice approach does seem to provide a better interpretation than any others on offer of such diverse phenomena as British housing policy, the customer-responsiveness of the Gas Board, and the nature of governments' trade and industrial policies in both developed and underdeveloped societies. Specifically, what alternative explanation is on offer of the twin global economic disasters of systematic agricultural protectionism in developed countries and anti-agriculture discrimination in developing countries?

I am less concerned than John Dearlove by methodological individualism as such, and I think that it is the assumption that individuals act selfishly that is the aspect of the public choice approach most vulnerable to attack. The act of voting is inconsistent

with selfish individualism; and Downs's account of the behaviour of political parties also raises some questions — for should the individual party members or leaders not be individually pursuing self-interest rather than collectively pursuing election victory? The question then is not whether the paradigm of the rational self-seeking individual is useful — for it has proved to be a powerful tool of social science — nor whether it alone can explain all social phenomena — for it clearly cannot. Rather, the question is where the boundary lies between behaviour that is explained by selfish individual action and behaviour that involves altruism or other collectivist motivations. The location of that boundary seems not to be the same in all societies. Nor is it a boundary that has all economic behaviour on one side; and all social and political behaviour on the other. As political scientists and others become more aware of the usefulness of the economists' tools, so should economists become more aware of the limitations of their dominant mode of reasoning. I therefore agree with what I take to be the central message of John Dearlove's paper, his defence of eclecticism.

I also agree, finally, that the proponents of the 'public choice' approach tend to be opponents of state involvement in the economy, but we should not necessarily judge ideas by the company they keep. The public choice approach does not inevitably lead to a conservative apologia for the market mechanism — indeed some of its implications for the analysis of interest groups, especially in Third World economies, seem to be to be quite radical.